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SPEECH

OF

HON. PERCY WALKER, OF ALABAMA,  
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DELIVERED

IN THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES, DECEMBER 18, 1855,

IN REFERENCE TO

THE ORGANIZATION OF THE HOUSE.



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## ORGANIZATION OF THE HOUSE.

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The House being engaged with the question of election of Speaker,

Mr. WALKER rose and said: I ask the gentleman from Iowa to withdraw his resolution to enable me to make a personal explanation.

Mr. THORINGTON. I will withdraw it for that purpose.

Mr. WALKER. In taking my seat upon this floor I had determined, as a general rule for my action here, not to notice newspaper comments upon my course. But at this particular juncture, sir, in the condition of parties in this House, in view of the great popular anxiety caused by that condition, by the failure of this House thus far to effect an organization—knowing the fact, every member upon this floor, however humble, however unknown he may be, becomes the object of scrutiny, of examination; and I feel it due to myself and to the party with which I have acted here, to vindicate my own conduct, and, as far as I can, attempt, at least, a vindication of that party.

I hold in my hand a paper published in the southern extreme of this Union, a leading paper in my own district—a paper devoted to the advocacy of the Democratic party of this country. That paper, of the 13th of the present month, in commenting upon an article to be found in another paper published in the same city, but which paper supports the great principles of the American party in that country—I say, in commenting upon that article, the paper I hold in my hand—the Mobile Register—uses the following language:

“The Democratic party in Congress has taken its stand upon its principles—principles not of to-day or to-morrow,

but principles that will stand the test of time, and remain the sure foundation of a party that appeals to the patriotism of the people to support it for their own and the country's good. They have no bargains to offer. They do not choose to buy southern Know Nothings to do their duty to their constituents with the paltry pelf of an office, or a contemptible advantage in the distribution of the powers of the House. They offer a creed and a candidate that *ought* to command southern Know Nothing votes; but the Advertiser and its small party in Congress prefer trifling to duty, prefer to waste their suffrages on impossible candidates to planting them where they will tell against the enemies of the South; and they salve their consciences under this solemn mockery by upbraiding a solid body of seventy-nine Democrats for not coming to their corporal's guard of thirty, and electing Humphrey Marshall. Oh, but they are willing to go to Richardson, but they have met with no encouragement from the Democrats; they have been treated with contempt. We fancy no Democrat would have thrown an obstacle in their way if they had walked up to vote for Richardson. If they have met with a rebuff, then, it is on account of the trade they brought in their hands as a consideration for their voting for Richardson. They are ready to do their duty, ready to make common cause with the only party that is available to combat Abolitionism, provided they get a valuable consideration for it. Out upon such transparent attempts to hoodwink the people of the South in reference to the true state of this case! The fact stands patent to the public eye, that the southern Know Nothings are engaged in solemn trifling, while they have had it in their power to have defeated the arch-conspirators, Seward, Weed, and Greeley, who are plotting against the safety of the South and the peace of the Union.”

In the issue of the same paper of the day preceding this, in another article commenting upon the state of affairs in this House, the editors refer to me by name, and charge me with having trifled in the discharge of my duty; they say, that upon a certain day I am recorded as having voted for a Mr. Davis for Speaker, and that in turn Mr. Davis voted for me.

Now, sir, as I remarked before, under ordinary circumstances, I should have taken no heed to such comments; but I think the time has come

when every man's position upon this floor should not only be known to his fellow-members, but made known to the country. He should make known where he stands, and where he intends to stand. Why, sir, this small body of thirty men have not only been the target for the press of the country, but they have been used in this House in the game of shuttle-cock and battle-door, by the Republicans on the one side, and by the Democracy on the other. What has the gentleman from Tennessee [Mr. SMITH] said? That the Democratic party was the only one in this House acting upon principle. Why, sir, it is the principle of party arrogance, of party exclusiveness. They met in their preliminary caucus, and adopted a resolution which many of the calmer members of the party cannot but admit to be an insult to members upon this floor who agreed with them on the general principles of Government, and only differed with them in reference to a mere matter of legislative expediency.

Well, what is the condition of this small body of thirty men? and where do they stand? Have they acted thus far in a spirit of captiousness, of caprice? What objects had they to gain? What had been the result of persistency in their efforts upon this floor? Why, sir, is there a man here who has not before this realized the fact that, if these southern Know Nothings, on the opening of the session, had rallied to the support of the Democratic candidate, (and here permit me to say that I am glad to have met that gentleman in this Hall—I say it though not belonging to the party of which he is the standard-bearer—the compliment extended to him is justly his due;) the fact, I say, must now be realized by all parties, that, if the southern Know Nothings had, at the opening of the contest, thrown themselves into the ranks of that gentleman's supporters, there could have been no result other than to have *freesoiled* the organization of the House. A union of the southern Know Nothings with the Democratic party could not have insured the election of Mr. RICHARDSON, for the simple reason, that the two forces united would not constitute a majority of this House, and such an effort would in all probability have placed the control of the House in the hands of the Free-Soilers. Then, so far as the southern Know Nothings of this House are concerned, the effect of our action has been to stave off and prevent such an organization as the one mentioned.

But, sir, that party claims to be a national one. It was said on yesterday, that its claim to nationality is predicated on—what? On a certain number of southern gentlemen calling themselves

Democrats, who have united with fifteen gentlemen from northern States, only one or two, I believe, coming from a State further north than Pennsylvania. This union of a portion of southern members upon this floor with a small fragment of the northern representation, constitutes, in their apprehension, a full and complete title and ground to the claim of nationality. Contrast their position, so far as the claim to nationality is concerned, with that of the National America or Know Nothing party of this House. Some twenty-six or twenty-seven southern gentlemen with fifteen northern gentlemen, coming from some of the largest States in the Union, uniting for a common purpose, standing upon a basis known to this country, and pledged by their acts here to do—what? Why, to abide by existing laws on the subject of slavery; to resist with all their efforts a renewal of the agitation of the subject in and out of this Hall; and to vote for the admission of a State into the Union, whether its constitution does or does not recognize slavery as one of its social institutions. This is the position of this much-abused and vilified American party of this House; and when I use the term "American party," understand me as only making application to those thirty or forty with whom I have thus far acted.

But, say my Democratic friends, theirs is the only national party. National! Why, sir, its claims to nationality rest upon a sandy foundation.

Now, I would ask them, and in no taunting spirit, whether they have the power to unite in harmonious action its members from different sections? I ask them to point me to any great principle emblazoned upon their present banner, potent enough to break down geographical and sectional questions?

It has no just claim to nationality. It maintains, it is true, here and there, its name and organization, but it has long since lost that integrity of aim and purpose, that attachment to principle, which heretofore won the popular regard and favor.

It lives but under the shadow of its past renown. It can only purchase a nationality by unmanly and disgraceful compromises. But even at such a cost its claim to nationality is an empty boast.

North of Mason and Dixon's line it has shared the fate of its old adversary, and been absorbed in the swelling tide of Free-Soilism.

At the South, it is divided between the supporters and the opponents of the Administration; and it is a fact known to the country, that its successes in the late elections, achieved as they

were by the coöperation of Whigs—who, without any coincidence of opinion, save opposition to the American party, united with them for the time—have been rather the result of local and State issues, and a misconception of the aims and purposes of the new party, than any general popular recognition of any great, living principle of the Democratic party. I ask if this is not a portraiture of the Democratic party? Yet this is their claim to nationality; and because southern men, having an identity of feeling with them, withhold their coöperation, they are accused as leaguings against that party with Free-Soilers. As long as that insulting resolution stares them in the face, and is not retracted, it places them in a humiliating position. I ask the members of that party, in all candor and kindness, whether they are just in putting us in that position?

Mr. JONES, of Pennsylvania. Will the gentleman allow me to make a single remark?

Mr. WALKER. Certainly.

Mr. JONES. As I had the honor of submitting the resolution to which he refers, I wish to state exactly what was meant by it. I will merely state that the nationality of Pennsylvania, instead of being represented upon this floor this day by six national votes, would poll seventeen for Mr. RICHARDSON, if it were not for Know Nothingism, which is understood, in my country, to be synonymous with Free-Soilism. The nationality of the Democratic party in this House, in my opinion, consists in this fact: that the *whole body* of the Democratic members from the *North*, and the *whole body* of the Democratic members from the *South*, act together here as a unit. No other party here presents that aspect. Now the gentleman from Alabama certainly does not impute to me, or those gentlemen who voted for my resolution, an intention to insult any individual, or any class of individuals. I am sure such was not the case. My friend will search those resolutions in vain to find a word about the American party. We speak of the Know Nothing party, which, in my country—and I presume it is the same elsewhere—means Free-Soilism concealed, in contradistinction to Free-Soilism openly and publicly professed.

I merely wish my friend to understand, as an allusion was made to the same thing yesterday, that, as I understand the Democracy, they only wished to place themselves on a national platform before the whole country, so that neither gentlemen from the North nor gentlemen from the South should misunderstand their position. They mean to stand upon that platform without com-

promise or concession; they do it from devotion to what they believe to be a great principle, and as a duty which they owe to their country; but they never did design to cast any imputation upon any class or classes of men.

I hope, therefore, my friend from Alabama will understand that, in speaking of the Know Nothing party, as a Pennsylvania Democrat I mean to say that, but for that party by that name called and known—and the records of the country sustain me in that position—I believe that Pennsylvania this day would cast a vote that no man would question the nationality of.

Mr. ALLISON. Will the gentleman from Alabama allow me to put an inquiry to my colleague from the Berks district?

Mr. WALKER. I will yield for that purpose.

Mr. ALLISON. I wish to know whether I understood my colleague aright. I understood him to say that the principles of the Know Nothing party and of the Free-Soil or anti-Nebraska party were identical, and therefore that there was not a majority of national Democrats from Pennsylvania on this floor. Now, if I understood my colleague aright, I wish to say that I indorse the idea expressed by him—that had it not been for the fact that the people of Pennsylvania condemned the Kansas and Nebraska act of the last Congress, it might have been that seventeen national Democrats would have been found upon this floor; but having condemned that act, the Know Nothings and the Free-Soil party united, and Pennsylvania is represented here by a majority of those who condemn that act. [Laughter.]

Mr. JONES. What was my colleague's question? I did not understand it.

Mr. ALLISON. The question I desired to put to my colleague was this: Whether I understood him aright to say that the sentiments of the Free-Soil party and the Know Nothing party were identical upon the question of the extension of slavery?

Mr. JONES. Yes; but I wish to explain myself in three words, so that I cannot be misunderstood.

Mr. ALLISON. Oh, I perfectly agree with my colleague.

Mr. JONES. What I meant to say, Mr. Clerk, was this, that the national Democratic party of Pennsylvania are willing any day, and at any hour, to meet the Free-Soil party, as known by that name, and to risk everything upon that issue before the people of Pennsylvania; but when a society, calling itself Know Nothing, is also in

the field, with a secret organization, and concealing those very same Free-Soil principles—an underground organization with an above-ground operation—between the two, the Democratic party is left with only six Representatives standing; but we are proud of those six.

Mr. CAMPBELL, of Pennsylvania. Will the gentleman from Alabama allow me to say a word in reply to my colleague.

Mr. WALKER. Not now; I prefer to go on. We are all, Mr. Clerk, in the habit of hearing much said about principle and party, but I think the gentleman from Pennsylvania, [Mr. JONES,] in the preparation of his resolution which was adopted by the Democratic caucus, and the persistence of that party in adhering to that resolution, only show what is by no means uncommon, that there is a proneness in all men to confound mere principle with party. They seem to forget, sir, that the two things are essentially different; that the principle had its birth long before party; that the party is a mere instrumentality to carry out an established fact which is an idea of the mind—a principle which, though it in fact has no substantiality, though it has no tangible shape or form to the outward eye, though I cannot hold it in my hand as I do this glass, yet, sir, that it has within itself a power and a vitality of its own, whilst, on the contrary, a party is a mere means for the purpose of carrying out and putting life into that principle.

The gentleman says that the Democratic party stands upon principle. Now, what can you hear from their own ranks, from the more frank among them, upon this very subject of organizing this House, and of the object they had in view in placing themselves upon that platform? Why, that they had no hope of obtaining the organization of this House; that many of them do not desire it; that they look at it as a hazardous thing for them in a party point of view; that the country may possibly hold them responsible for whatever legislation may take place in this Hall; and that, therefore, as a mere party movement, it may not be wise and politic for them to take the organization. And yet, forsooth, their action is based upon a naked, great conservative principle! Are there not men upon this floor who occupy the same ground with themselves upon this principle—a principle going back, if you please, to the great vital doctrine of State rights; an indirect recognition of the sovereignty of these States; that this Union, all glorious as it has been, securing, as it has done heretofore, all imaginable blessings, and serving as a means to carry out the purposes of its founders; yet that, after all, it is

not the Union—the Union alone, upon which the reflecting man of this country bases his hopes and rests his affections. With him the Union is secondary in importance to the principles it was designed to perpetuate and establish, and is only worthy of the just man's and the patriot's reverence and support so long as it serves to carry out and perpetuates those principles.

But I am wandering from my object. I spoke, in the first place, of the condition of these parties in the House. I will now, as I am upon the floor, say something of the condition of parties in the country, to account for the present aspect of political affairs in this country. How happens it, sir, that there is in fact no national party now? How happens it that one great party has disappeared from the field of action, and that another party, which so long held sway upon the popular heart of this country, has lost its claim to nationality? How happens it that we are broken up into segments and fragments? How happens it that we are all becoming more or less sectionalized in our professions? Why, sir, one of the reasons I will give you: Your party leaders—the men who molded the public thought, and directed the popular heart, the men who made parties and governed them by that power which is the result of rare combinations of mental and moral qualities, have left the stage of action.

We no longer have the firm-handed, granite-willed Jackson, with his strongly-marked individuality, to head the columns of the Democracy and lead them on to victory.

The name and memory of Clay still hold a spell on our minds and hearts, but the strains of his almost matchless eloquence, flowing out, as they did, at times, with the swell and grandeur of some mighty symphony, no longer fill the Senate House, the field of his fame, the point from which his words went out over the land, stirring the hearts of his followers as with a clarion and summoning them to his standard.

Webster, to use his own words, "still lives," but it is in the record of his great thoughts and grand eloquence which form a part of our national renown. But his firm-set figure, his ponderous brow, his cavernous and inward-looking eye, are no longer beheld in that august Chamber, the scene of his great conflicts and triumphs. His deep, sonorous voice, rolling and swelling under the tide of that wondrous eloquence, which by turns won the imagination, captured the reason, and subdued the heart, is no longer heard within those walls consecrated by his genius. The master-mind, the controlling, ay, and the restraining spirit of New England, no longer



lives and labors to direct and guide her people, and save her from aggressions and encroachments upon her sisters and her equals.

And the pure patriot—the great statesman of the South—the man in whose policy, *self* had no place, save as his personal fame was identified with her glory and prosperity; he who never gave up to party what was meant for mankind—whose whole life was unsullied by a stain—whose noble nature was never seduced by office or honors, or intimidated by the fear of calumny or detraction from the path of right; he who gave all his great powers to the task of securing to the South the full measure of her rights, and to the inculcation of those true ideas of government upon which rest the sovereignty of the States, and the consequent perpetuity of the Union; the man who never trimmed or changed his policy to suit party demands or exigencies; the man whose large virtues made him the object of the hate and envy of party hucksters and time-serving demagogues,—the great Calhoun no longer lives to counsel and to warn us.

The Ithuriel spear of his living intellect, with which, in his indignant scorn, he pierced through corrupt party designs, and probed to the quick, purchasable party demagogues, no longer gleams and flashes; it has been shivered and broken by the scythe of Death.

The three great representative men of the nation—the grand triumvirate, who, though never holding the reins of Government in their hands, though never winning the place and title of President, yet stood higher than those upon whom popular favor cast the office, and who, by the power of their intellects, molded and directed popular thought and ruled the rulers,—have been taken away. And who remain to head and lead parties?

Between those men of whom I have spoken, and those who now aspire to be party leaders in this country, what a wide stretch of barren waste there is! Some of them are still laboring in the noise and confusion of past controversies. Some have lost their usefulness, their dignity, and their patriotism in the dark cess-pools of abolitionism. There is now no man in this country who, so to speak, has those large and grand national proportions which attract to himself the common eye, and center around him the common hopes of the country. This, then, is one of the chief reasons, in my judgment, for the present condition of things. The country has now no leader. There is now no one great man, standing out—giant-like—commanding and enforcing popular regard and authority. It was natural, when these par-

ties had lost their old leaders, when their places were filled by ambitious men of small stature, that affairs should assume their present aspect; that, in the absence of those controlling men, we should be broken up into fragments and sections.

But, sir, I cannot indulge in this train of remarks further, as I should both consume too much time and weary the patience of the House. But the fact has manifested itself in this House, for the first time in its history, that an attempt is making to organize it upon a merely sectional question. Why, sir, we yesterday heard a speech from a prominent member of this House, [Mr. BANKS,] whose position is identified, as we are informed by himself—at least such must be the inference of his remarks—with a great sectional movement, and places himself upon that movement to claim the support of a great party in this House. He rests his claim for support upon the staunchness of his anti-slavery opinions, boasting here, that from the State of Massachusetts, after his resistance to the Kansas-Nebraska act, he had been returned by an overwhelming majority. Thus claiming, or at least allowing us to infer, that he predicated his success upon the fact that he was identified with this great sectional movement. The other day we had placed upon our table a speech coming from one of those dandies in belle-lettres scholarships—a speech written for the purpose of inducing the northern mind to believe that the slave power of the South had been the great grasping power in this Confederacy,—that, from the foundation of the Government to the present time, the slave power had appropriated all the offices and power of this Government. Sir, what does all this mean?

Members from the North seem to think that the reason why the South has had so large a share in our governmental operations lies in the institution of slavery. I tell them they are mistaken. It lies behind that institution. It is to be found in the administrative faculty belonging to the early settlers of the South—the Cavaliers and Huguenots—and which their descendants have inherited.

Why, sir, I might ask, what great sentiment, what great governmental principle, originated at the North? The idea of the separation of Church and State, as a foundation republican principle, is to be found in Jefferson's bill. The right of universal suffrage had its birth in Maryland. The parallelism of State rights and Federal power originated in North Carolina and other southern States.

These men of the North talk here about the aggressions of the South, and they cite the

Kansas-Nebraska act of the last session. Well, sir, see how history exposes their inconsistency. After the adoption of the Missouri compromise, in 1820, what took place in the North? Why—if I mistake not—the North slew, with a single exception, every one of its members who voted for that compromise. And again, sir, when the Kansas-Nebraska bill, which repealed that compromise, came before the people of the northern States, what do we again see? Why, sir, with only an exception here and there, they slew the men from that section who voted on this floor to strike out what in times past had been an offensive measure—to wit, the Missouri compromise line—thus showing a singular unsteadfastness. And yet, Mr. Clerk, is it not apparent that what was wrong in 1820 could not have well been right in 1854? And if a northern man were cut down at the one time on account of his favoring the Missouri compromise, believed at that time to be essential to the preservation of the national peace and quiet—if he were cut down for his vote in support of that measure, is it not passing strange, when the followers of these men on this floor in the year 1854 vote to repeal what the North then regarded as an objectionable measure, that they should, for that very act, meet with the same fate which had befallen their predecessors?

Mr. Clerk, I have said far more than I dreamed of saying when I first rose to address this House. I have spoken discursively and wandringly, and I have now but a few words more to say. I am anxious to see this House organized. I am anxious that this House shall not pass under the control of the Republican party. I shall feel it my duty to use every possible effort to prevent such a consummation as that. And for the purpose of indicating here, and elsewhere, my own readiness to act with all men who are really conservative; to act with men who are opposed to further disturbance on this exciting subject of slavery; to act with men who still acknowledge their obligations to the Federal Constitution; to act with men who are prepared to abide by the existing laws on the subject of slavery; I say

here—and, if I am not mistaken, I think that in this I am speaking for almost the whole of the men with whom I have thus far acted—I am willing to go into a conference with all men who are prepared to stand on that basis, to confer together, and see if they cannot devise some plan by which there may be a safe, healthful, and conservative organization of this House.

Now, Mr. Clerk, it seems to me that the struggle between the dominant parties in this House is simply this: whether the great principle of non-interference with the rights of any portion of this Confederacy—States or Territories—save by the parties interested in them, is the only true Republican doctrine? And, sir, that, at least, is my political creed on this subject. And, unless I have misunderstood the gentlemen who have thus far acted with me, they occupy the same ground; and believing this, I am willing to confer with those members of this House who stand upon this general platform with me—to meet and confer with them, not as parties struggling only for personal or political ascendancy, but as men of any or all parties, actuated only by one common desire to serve the great interests of the country, and to insure a true and conservative organization of this House. I say, sir, that unless I am greatly mistaken in the feelings and the opinions of those with whom I have acted, I am but expressing their own thoughts, and giving utterance to their own wishes and their own hopes. And I submit this in taking my seat—and I beg that my words may be heard and understood—that if no organization be effected this day, those members of the House, coming from what sections they may, who are willing to abide by existing laws on the subject of slavery, who feel it their duty to vote for the admission of a State into this Union whether its constitution does or does not recognize slavery as a part of its social system, meet in this Hall this evening, at half past seven o'clock, for the purpose of having a conference to devise some plan by which a conservative organization may be effected here.



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